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ABSTRACT

Scholars and consultants have offered a multitude of definitions of listening. One group defines listening as an ongoing, nonstatic process by which spoken language is converted into meanings in the mind. The other group, the sequentialists, view listening as a linear sequence of events in which one aspect is dependent upon a preceding aspect. Unfortunately, there appears to be some confusion among many of the definers regarding their understanding of "process." A third group of definers avoids this process problem by stating that listening is four connected activities: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. An examination of several listening definitions reveals at least ten different conceptual components of listening: hearing, interpreting, understanding, assigning meaning, acting to the sound stimuli, selectively receiving the sound stimuli, remembering, purposefully attending to the sound stimuli, analyzing information presented, and using past experiences as a filter of the communicated information. Listening is a complex activity that should not be simplified at the expense of a number of clearly important concepts. A three-page list of references is included. (HOD)

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# ON DEFINING LISTENING: SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive review of listening definitions over the past 50 years. Development of three general approaches to defining listening and ten critical conceptual components of all definitions.

# ON DEFINING LISTENING: SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

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A little more than fifteen years ago Frank E. X. Dance (1970) attempted to clarify the concept of communication by identifying fifteen distinct conceptual components in various definitions offered by a number of scholars. Of even greater importance was that by studying the multitude of definitions he discovered three points of "critical conceptual differentiation," which formed the basic dimensions along which the various definitions differed. Why did Dance undertake such a study. What importance is attached to identifying a level of commonality? Of what value is there in knowing the differences among these definitions? Dance's motivation, as any scholar's motivation in defining terms or synthesizing research, was to provide a greater level of understanding for those studying a concept. We all must share a common understanding whenever focusing upon a concept within a field of knowledge. If the concepts are actually different, even when purported to be similar because of common terminology, the conclusions draw from one set of circumstances may not be valid for the other.

Listening today is where communication was those more than fifteen years ago. There are a multitude of definitions offered by a variety of scholars and consultants. Perhaps, Dance's conclusions

that ". . . we are trying to make the concept of 'communication' do too much work for us" (p. 210) and that we need to view communication as a family of concepts might similarly apply to listening. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to synthesize the numerous definitions of listening in hopes of identifying a family of concepts that might be appropriate for greater understanding.

First, there are markedly different approaches represented by the definers of listening. In one group, a number of definers approach listening from a process orientation. As many of us learned during the 1960's, 1970's and reconfirmed in the 1980's, communication is viewed as a process. We freely embrace definitions, similar to the one offered by DeVito, when he says that a process is an ". . . ongoing activity; nonstatic; communication is referred to as a process to emphasize that it is always changing, always in motion." (DeVito, 1985, p. 488).

In 1971 Sara Lundsteen offered her process orientated definition by stating that listening is ". . . the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind." (p. 9). How does this conversion take place? What are the important aspects of this process? What is meaning? While the definition is clear it lacks concreteness, a common problem of any process perspective. To discuss a process, by necessity, we must freeze the concept, thus negating the very quality it professes. Table 1 categorizes a number of definitions as belonging in the process camp.

The other group is represented by the sequentialists; those who view listening as a linear, sequence of events where one aspect

TABLE 1

LISTENING APPROACHES

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PROCESS ORIENTATION

" . . . the aural assimilation of spoken symbols in face-to-face speaker-audience situations, with both oral and visual cues present." Brown & Carlsen, 1955, p. 1.

"The conscious, purposeful registration of sounds upon the mind (which) leads to further mental activity . . . all true listening is creative." Hook, 1950, p. 238.

".. . . the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind." Lundsteen, 1971, p. 9.

" . . . a unitary process involving continuous interaction between humans as they focus on and selectivity perceive verbal and non-verbal signals through sight and sound, interpret the messages according to the mood and motivation of the moment; evaluate the information and attitudes expressed and decide how they'll us it; and finally react to the messages sent by giving some sort of feedback and storing or remembering the transaction." Walker, 1985.

SEQUENTIAL ORIENTATION

" . . . occurs when the impluses sent to the brain are interpreted and understood." Abrams, 1986, p. 76.

"Listening occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses (sound waves striking the eardrum causing vibrations that are transmitted to the brain) into a representation of the original sound, and then gives them meaning." Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 1986, p. 130.

" . . . oral language communicated by some source is received, critically and purposefully attended to, recognized, and interpreted (or comprehended) in terms of past experiences and future expectancies." Petrie, Jr., 1966, p. 329.

SEQUENTIAL ORIENTATION PROFESSING PROCESS

" . . . the process of reacting to, interpreting, and relating the spoken language in terms of past experiences and future courses of action." Barbe & Meyers, 1954, p. 82.

"The act of listening involves four distinct processes: receiving, perceiving, interpreting, and responding." Bradley, 1984, p. 32.

" . . . the selective process of attending to, hearing, understanding, and remembering aural symbols." Barker, 1971, p. 17.

" . . . an active process of receiving aural stimuli." DeVito, 1985, p. 60.

"Listening is the process of receiving, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to messages." Galvin,1985, p. 4.

" . . . the process whereby the human ear receives sound stimuli from other people and through a series of steps interprets the sound stimuli in the brain and remembers them." Hirsch, 1983, p. 1.

"Listening is the process of receiving and interpreting aural stimuli." Person & Nelson, 1985, p. 55.

" . . . a selective process by which sounds communicated by some source are received, critically interpreted, and acted upon by a purposeful listener." Jones, 1956,p. 12.

" . . . the process of hearing, identifying, understanding and interpreting spoken language." Lewis, 1958, p. 89.

" . . . a process that takes place when a human organism receives data aurally." Weaver, 1972, p. 132.

GENERALIST ORIENTATION

"Listening is a combination of what we hear, what we understand, and what we remember." Brooks & Heath, 1985, p. 86.

"Listening is an overall label for the complexphysiological, neurological, and psychological factors, involved in the understanding and retention of verbal material presented in spoken form." Dance & Zak-Dance, 1986, p. 224.

"Listening is hearing (receiving the message as sent), analyzing (discerning purpose, using critical or creative judgment), and empathizing (being fully present to the other)." Glatthorn & Adams, 1983, pp. 1-4.

" . . . the . . . act really consists of four connected activities--sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding." Steil, 1981, p. 3.

is dependent upon a preceeding aspect. I must profess that the definition I originally presented in 1979 and reconfirmed in 1983 exemplifies this approach. I stated that listening was ". . . the process whereby the human ear receives sound stimuli from other people and through a series of steps (assigning importance to the stimuli or symbols, relating the symbols to past experiences, evaluating the symbols, interpretating the symbols, expanding the meaning of the symbols, and integrating the meaning of the symbols) interprets the sound stimuli in the brain and remembers them." (Hirsch, 1983, pp. 1 & 8). In fact, there are a number of other definers that reflect a similar orientation and many of these are similarly represented in Table 1.

Unfortunately, there appears to be some confusion among many of the definers regarding their understanding of process. A substantial number of individuals begin their definitions by stating that listening is a process (as I must admit I fell prey to this dichotomy) and defining it as a sequence of steps, static, and non-changing. Either the meaning of process is substantially different for listening than it is for communication, or a group of us definers are misusing the term. I suspect there is a little of each.

A third group of definition offerers avoid this problem all together. They neither state that listening is a process nor provide a sequential pattern of events. William Brooks and Robert Heath, in their basic course text, identify listening as " . . . a combination of what we hear, what we understand, and what we

remember." (1985, p. 86). Two additional notable definitions in this camp are offered by Dance and Zak-Dance (1986) and Steil (1981) when Dance and Zak-Dance stated that, "Listening is an overall label for the complex physiological, neurological, and psychological factors, involved in the understanding and retention of verbal material presented in spoken form." (p. 224) and Steil noted that listening was ". . . the . . . act really consists of four connected activities -- sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding." (p. 3). While these definitions appear sequential, is it more a function of the aspect of providing a definition or an implied meaning of a linear understanding of listening? The key terms of the above definitions ("combination," "complex," and "connected") imply that perhaps listening is not sequential, but do not make the case that listening is a process, either.

After examining a number of listening definitions (special thanks for the original efforts of Wolvin and Coakley, 1985), some dating back to the 1920's, it appears as though there are at least ten clearly different conceptual components ofthis activity. These components are identified in Table 2 with representative definitions reflecting their emphasis. The ten components are: (1) a neurological aspect or hearing, (2) interpretation of the sound stimuli, (3) understanding the sound stimuli, (4) assigning meaning to the sound stimuli, (5) acting or reacting to the sound stimuli, (6) selectively receiving some of the sound stimuli and ignoring others, (7) remembering what was communicated, (8) purposefully attending to the sound stimuli, (9) analyzing the

information presented, and (10) utilizing past experiences as a filter of the communicated information.

There appears to be a tendency to simplify listening. Most definers indicate that there are four components of listening, even though there is little agreement on those four components. A few definitions settle on two and three components while one (Wolff, et al., 1983) indicates that there are six components and Hirsch (1983) notes that there are nine concepts associated with this activity. While I also subscribe to the concept to parsimony, I do not believe that we should simplify at the expense of eliminating important concepts associated with listening. Listening is a complex activity that clearly has a number of important concepts, some more important than others, depending upon to whom you are talking or reading.

TABLE 2

CONCEPTUAL COMPONENTS IN LISTENING

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Neurological (Hearing) | "Listening occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses (sound waves striking the eardrum causing vibrations that are transmitted to the brain) into a representation of the original sound, and gives them meaning." Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1986, p. 130. |
| | " . . . a process that takes place when a human organism receives data aurally." Weaver, 1972, p. 132. |
| 2. Interpretation | " . . . occurs when the impulses sent to the brain are interpreted and understood." Abrams, 1986, p. 76. |
| | "Listening is the process of receiving and interpreting aural stimuli." Person & Nelson, 1985, p. 55. |
| 3. Understanding | " . . . the ability to understand spoken language." Rankin, 1952, p. 847. |
| | " . . . the capacity of an individual to understand spoken language in the presence of a speaker." Still, 1955, p. 45. |
| 4. Meaning | " . . . the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind." Lundsteen, 1971, p. 9. |
| | "Listening involves the reception and comprehension of sounds, organizing that comprehension into a meaningful pattern." Zeuschner, 1985, p. 24. |
| 5. Action (Reaction) | " . . . the act of giving attention to the spoken word, not only in hearing symbols, but in the reacting with understanding." Hampleman, 1958, p. 49. |
| 6. Selectivity | " . . . the selective process of attending to, hearing, understanding, and remembering aural symbols." Barker, 1971, p. 17. |
| | " . . . a selective process by which sounds communicated by some source are received, critically interpreted . . ." Jones, 1956, p. 12. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 7. | Remember (Memory) | " . . . consists of hearing, understanding, and remembering." Hunsaker, 1983, p. 111. |
| 8. | Purposeful | "The conscious, purposeful registration of sounds upon the mind (which) leads to further mental activity . . . all true listening is creative." Hook, 1950, p. 238. |
| | | " . . . the composite process by which oral language communicated by some source is received, critically and purposefully attended to, recognized, and interpreted (or comprehended) in terms of past experiences and future expectancies." Petrie, Jr., 1966, p. 329. |
| 9. | Analytical (Critical) (Evaluative) | " . . . an analysis of the impressions resulting from concentration where an effort of will is required." Tucker, 1925, p. 548. |
| 10. | Experiences | " . . . the process of reacting to, interpreting, and relating the spoken language in terms of past experiences and future courses of action." Barbe & Meyers, 1954, p. 82. |
| 11. | Combinations: | |
| | 2 Concepts | "Listening is . . . understanding and retention of verbal material presented in spoken form." Dance & Zak-Dance, 1986, p. 224. |
| | | " . . . the ability to understand and respond effectively to oral communication." Johnson, 1951, p. 58. |
| | 3 Concepts | "Listening is a combination of what we hear, what we understand, and what we remember." Brooks & Heath, 1985, p. 86. |
| | | " . . . the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli." Wolvin & Coakley, 1985, p. 74. |
| | 4 Concepts | "The act of listening involves four distinct processes: receiving, perceiving, interpreting, and responding." Bradley, 1984, p. 32. |
| | | "Listening is the process of receiving, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to messages." Galvin, 1985, p. 4. |
| | | " . . . consists of four connected activities--sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding." Steil, 1981, p. 3. |

" . . . the process of hearing, identifying, understanding and interpreting spoken language." Lewis, 1958, p. 89.

"Listening involves four interrelated steps--receiving (physiological process of listening), attending (focusing on a specific sound), assigning meaning (brain interpreting the message), and remembering (storing the message for later use)." Samovar & Mills, 1986, p. 78.

" . . . continuous interation between humans as they focus on and selectively perceive verbal and non-verbal signals through sight and sound, interpret the messages according to the mood and motivation of the moment; evaluate the information and attitudes expressed and decide how they'll use it; and finally react to the messages sent by giving some sort of feedback and storing or remembering the transaction." Walker, 1985.

6 Concepts

" . . . a unitary, receptive process of hearing, selecting, assimilating, organizing, retaining, and covertly responding to aural and nonverbal stimuli." Wolf, Marsnik, Tacey, and Nichols, 1983, p. 211.

9 Concepts

Listening is ". . . hearing the sound stimuli from another person, identifying the sound stimuli as symbols, assigning importance to the symbols, relating the symbols to past experiences, evaluating the symbols, interpreting the symbols, expanding the meaning of the symbols, integrating the meaning of the symbols, and remembering the integrated meaning on both a short- and long-term basis." Hirsch, 1983, p. 8.

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